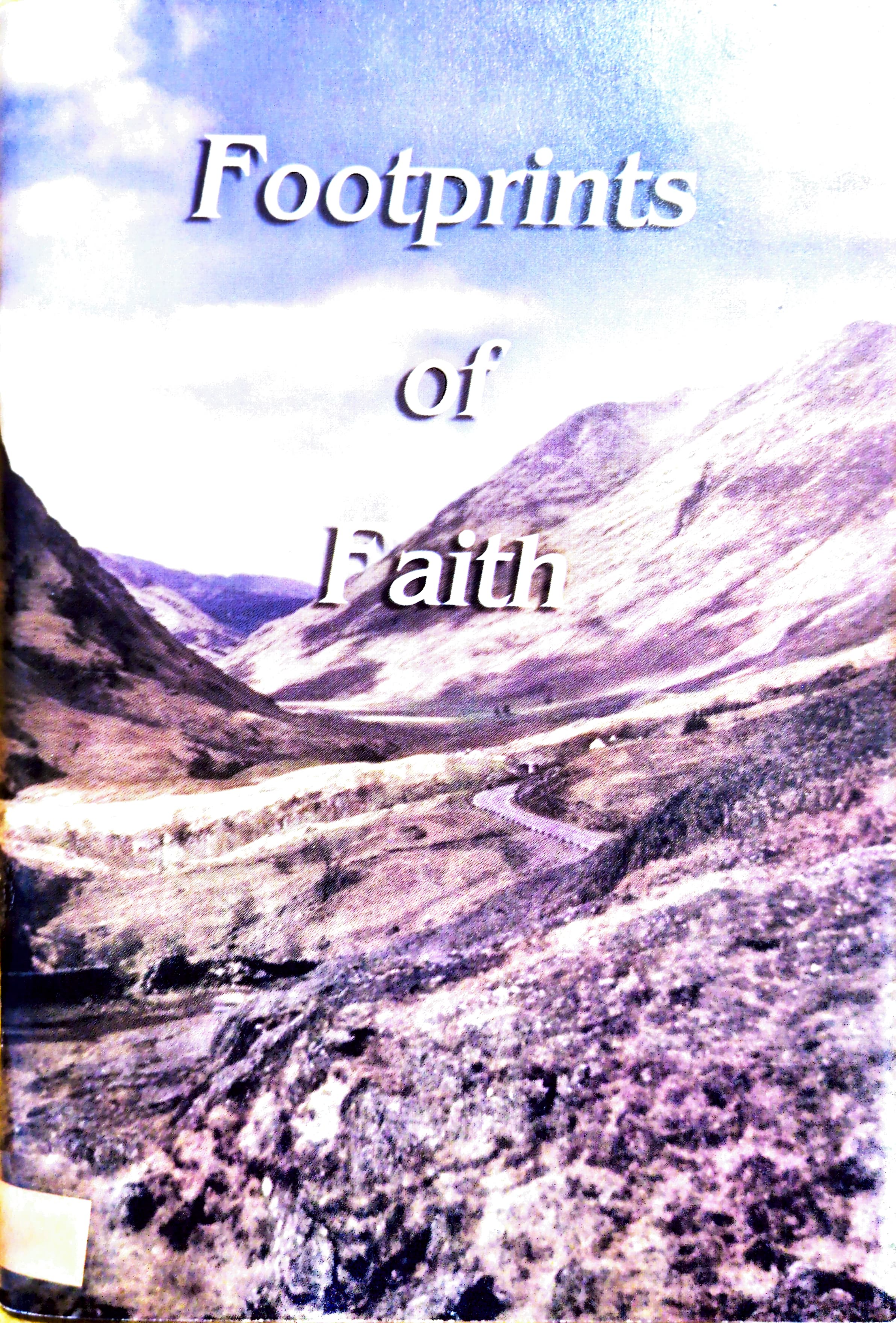
Footprints of Faith



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если вас интересует только своя
жизнь

Footprints of Faith

Mikhail Khorev and his sisters as children

by Mikhail Khorev
translated by Michael Jantzi

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Foreword

This account, which took place in the former U.S.S.R., was previously printed in the Russian language in the periodical *Vestnik Istiny*, a publication of the unregistered Evangelical Christians-Baptists. It has been translated and reprinted for the inspiration of the English reading audience.

The reader will find the chapters organized by subject rather than by chronology.

In the year 2003, the author, Mikhail Khorev, is still serving as a bishop in the unregistered brotherhood in the country of Moldova.

—The Publisher

Introduction

Much has been written and said about the difficult times our country experienced in the 1930s. All our people, including the Christians, were acquainted with sorrows, tears, arrests, and separation during those years. Many a Christian individually struggled to remain faithful. Christians were viewed as enemies of the nation, causing even close friends and family members to turn their backs on them. The parents of each persecuted family carried a great burden on their backs: trying to keep their children from starvation and sickness, wandering about without a permanent dwelling place, and sacrificing everything for the sake of their children. But in spite of all the odds, they strove most of all to instill a fear of God in their children.

In those bygone years there was no established system of spiritual and material care for the families of prisoners. The children grew up with little exposure to church services. Therefore, the family unit was the only source of instruction whereby children were taught sacred truths and hope in the Lord.

Where did these faithful Christians find their strength? Their strength lay in God. As He looked down upon them from heaven, He saw that in those indescribably difficult times, the sacred responsibility of training their children wearied the souls of the parents, and He reached down to help them. With His invisible hand He guided the children onto the narrow path of Christ. When these children came to the age of accountability, they chose the path of suffering as the only true way. Most of the leading presbyters[1] of the ECB[2] Council of Churches[3] of today are children of the prisoners of the 1930s.

This runs counter to the reasoning of natural man. These children passed their childhood in wanderings. They never knew what it was like to eat as much as they wanted. They grew up without fathers. What then attracted them to this thorny path? The answer to this feat of faith lies in the firm faith of the prisoners' widows. They wholeheartedly, uncomplainingly, took the way of the cross that their husbands had trodden, and they guided the footsteps of their children onto this path. They loved the Lord with their whole heart. There was no insincerity in their lives, and their children's sensitive hearts could not help but perceive it.

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[1] Presbyter: Equal to bishop.

[2] ECB: Evangelical Christians-Baptists.

[3] Council of Churches: The conference of evangelical believers in the former Soviet Union that split off of the registered church in the 1960s. The division occurred because the registered church was compromising with the demands of the authorities.

This parental example of faithfulness to God served as the basis of many sons and daughters joining the family of God and becoming fellow laborers in the vineyard of the Lord.

We present the letters and memories of one of the leading presbyters of the ECB Council of Churches, Mikhail Ivanovich Khorev, in which he tells of his parents and their faith and sacrifice as they brought up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

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Footprints of Faith

As I reminisce about my childhood and my parents, I thank the Lord that my parents taught me to love Jesus and to follow Him no matter where He leads. I will share what I remember of my childhood and some lessons I have learned, in hopes that these memories will be a blessing to many people and bring glory to God.

My father, Ivan Mikhailovich Khorev, was born in 1892 in Pskovsky oblast.[4] He came to the Lord in 1912 when he was a seaman in Petrograd.[5] One day he and other men from his ship had attended a church service at a prayer house[6] on Vasilyevsky Island. The Holy Spirit had touched his and a few other sailors' hearts, and they repented. My father's love for the Lord prompted him to witness to other sailors about Jesus Christ. Consequently, he was arrested as a troublemaker. He underwent his first prison sentence (approximately seventeen days) under the tsar's regime, and his second sentence was given soon after the Revolution of 1917.

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[4] Oblast: A political subdivision in the former U.S.S.R. similar to a state or province but with less governing powers, named after the main city in the oblast, which in this case is Pskov.

[5] Petrograd: Present-day St. Petersburg.

[6] Prayer house: Evangelical believers from the former U.S.S.R. call their church houses prayer houses.

I. N. Shilov, the presbyter of the Petrograd church, addressed an intercessory telegram to Lenin asking for my father's release, for he had been arrested on the grounds that he had "invited his fellow comrades to church and spoke to them about God." The answer to this telegram was positive. My father was freed. (Eighteen years later at a special session of the NKVD,[7] Shilov, as the presbyter of a church, was sentenced to the highest degree of punishment—execution.)

In the 1920s my father was ordained as an evangelist and began to evangelize in Pskovsky, Velikoluksky, and Novgorodsky oblasts. Eyewitnesses reported that he did not leave a village until people had come to the Lord and until there was a brother among the group of new believers who could at least read the Bible and pray, if not preach.

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[7] NKVD: The People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs. This organization was the forerunner of the KGB.

In 1927 my father married Agrippina Mikhailovna. This was his second marriage. His first wife had died soon after their marriage, leaving him no children.

"When Ivan Mikhailovich proposed to me," recalled Mama, "I asked him how, as a minister, he could leave his sick wife alone at home and go on evangelization journeys for half a year at a time. He answered, 'Serving God must always take priority.' I then understood the power of his love to the Lord, and I agreed to be his helpmeet in service."

The Almighty willed that this family would become my home. My father was rarely at home. He was always busy in the work of the church, and was always in a hurry. If he was at home, there was a continual stream of believers coming to visit him. His life as a minister of the Gospel consisted of constant discussions, prayer sessions with people, and trips. The needs of the people of God, the needs of the church, and the proclamation of the Gospel constituted the atmosphere that reigned in our home. That atmosphere left an indelible imprint on my heart. Now I understand that, in spite of Papa's tremendous commitment, it was not easy for him to find time to teach us the ways of the Lord.

In the spring of 1933 Leningrad[8] introduced a new passport system, which resulted in all religious ministers being denied passports and ordered to leave the city. According to secret directions from the Federal Department of Political Affairs,[9] dated March 16, 1933, no passport-issuing office in the city was permitted to issue passports to "religious ministers, deacons, and choir directors, even if he was an amateur." There were orders to pay special attention to "especially active religious people, even if they are not part of the twenty charter members, but work actively in the church. Such activity is to be reported to the local troika.[10] We definitely must annihilate those who hinder our work the most."

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[8] Leningrad: Present-day St. Petersburg.

My parents also had their passports taken. Papa lost his job. He was warned several times to leave the city, but there was nowhere to go and no means by which to get there. He stayed in Leningrad, relying on God's mercy.

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[9] The Federal Department of Political Affairs: The forerunner of the NKVD.

[10] Troika: A jury of three men, usually consisting of a government official, a doctor, and a NKVD officer. This was Stalin's new justice system and had full authority, from arresting a person, to executing him a few hours later if they chose.

An Unusual Request

I believe I am correct in saying that my father's boundless trust in God placed a firm foundation of faith in my heart. His profound faith was imprinted in my memory by an experience in my early childhood. I have already told this story many times, but, in spite of the fact that I am already an elderly man, it still touches me so deeply that I tremble as I venture to repeat it again. Each time I retell it, I bow in reverence before the mercy and might of God.

Our family lived in a big room on the second floor, in such deep poverty that we did not even own a lamp. There was a street light across from our window that at night shed weak rays of light onto the street. Papa was an electrician, so he repaired it. He put a powerful light bulb into it, and directed the light into our window. After putting the children to sleep, Papa would take a chair and sit by the windowsill to read Christian literature. His favorite pastime was studying the Word of God.

The day came when there was no more food in the house. However, our parents' worries did not affect us children. My three sisters were playing with their dolls, and I was driving them around the room in a toy car. That evening after family devotions, we children settled down for the night, but sleep did not come for our parents.

"I do not know what to feed the children tomorrow," fretted Mama. "Maybe we should borrow from somebody."

"How can we borrow if we have no means with which to pay it back? Neither you nor I have a job. Besides that, do you really think they will return our passports. . . ?" contemplated my father. "Remember, the Psalmist David said that he had lived many years and had not yet seen a righteous man forsaken nor his posterity begging bread. Dear, I don't think we're seeking help from the right place. We will raise our hands to God and not to people. He is rich and generous."

"I am not doubting the power of God, but I see no other way out for tomorrow," sighed Mama.

"Why don't you have a day off tomorrow? You haven't visited your friends for a long time. Go visit them tomorrow. You can relax a bit, and I'll care for the children."

"I can't imagine what you will give them to eat," shrugged Mama. "There isn't a crumb left in the house."

"Don't worry so much, Dear. God will see to it that the children do not go hungry."

With that, the difficult day came to a close. My parents prayed, entrusting their family to the heavenly Father. They asked the Lord to help them remain faithful and to keep them from going off the straight path.

Papa had a practice of allowing Mama to go visit her friends once a month. That day he would care for the children. Mama usually returned home from those visits in high spirits and with renewed energy to fulfill her daily tasks. But this time Mama did not go anywhere. She was too curious to see what Papa would feed the children.

That morning we had our regular family devotions. Our supper the evening before had been very skimpy, so immediately after devotions we asked for something to eat. After Mama left the room and began to do the laundry, Papa proposed, "Let's take turns ordering what we want for dinner."

We looked at each other in bewilderment. We had not eaten whatever we wanted for a long time. But today it was like in a fairy tale—we could order what we wanted!

"Vera, dear, what do you want for dinner today?" my father kindly asked my older sister.

She thought for a while and then, putting her finger to her lips, wistfully said, "A sweet roll."

"What kind?"

"A cream bun!"

"Okay, but first you have to eat some kind of soup or bouillon."

"Yes, Papa, I want meat broth!" exclaimed Vera, jumping up and down and clapping her hands.

This was the limit of her imagination. To us children, it was like a new game to imagine those crunchy buns we had seen in the showcase at the store.

"Nadia, darling, what do you want?"

Nadia liked Vera's order so well that she ordered the exact same thing, except she added, "I want a doll with eyes that close."

"Excellent," agreed Papa, and then turned to me, "Well, Meesha,[11] what would you like?"

I repeated the orders of my older sisters. My youngest sister, Maria, also wanted broth, a cream bun, and a doll. Papa looked at us thoughtfully and said, "Children, I have to tell you that I cannot even buy bread, much less cream buns. I do not have one kopeck[12] left. But we have a God—an Almighty God. He is very rich and generous! We'll kneel now, and you ask Him for whatever you want. Just repeat your requests to God the same simple way you said them to me. He will hear you!" We very willingly agreed.

"Lord, send me meat broth and a cream bun," prayed

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[11] Meesha: The short form for Mikhail (Michael).

[12] Kopeck: One hundredth of a ruble, the Russian currency.

Vera. "Papa says that You are very rich and can do anything. Thank you, Jesus, that You are so kind and love us so much!"

Papa prayed last. We strained to catch every word he said. "Dear heavenly Father! I thank You from the depths of my heart that You call us Your children and give us the right to ask You for everything we need. You never forget about us. Lord, we belong to You and love You. We want to be with You both here on earth and in eternity. Keep us faithful until You come!"

He spoke with God as with a close Friend who was standing among us, although we could not see Him. "Lord, You know my path; I don't. I realize that I may be with my children for only a few more days, and then I may go on the path of suffering, leaving my loved ones in Your care. I will not be able to pass on to them the faith and trust that You have given me.

"God, You heard the requests of the children. I plead with You that according to Your mercies You would show them Your power and glory! Send what they have requested. I trust You, Lord, and I thank You that You will not disappoint my faith, nor the faith of my children. Honor, glory, and praise be to You, my Lord, and my God. Amen!"

We children echoed Papa's "Amen." When we got up from our knees, Papa asked us to sing a song. When Mama heard us singing, she came and looked into the room. "Is that your breakfast?" wondered Mama, looking at Papa in surprise.

"Dear Mama," he smiled. "We asked God to feed us, and now we're waiting for His answer."

She hurried back to the kitchen to quickly finish the laundry so she could go find some food. Suddenly the doorbell rang. It was the mailman. Wiping her hands, Mama took the two notices the mailman handed to her, and froze in astonishment.

"A parcel! From whom?" she said to herself. "And money! Nobody owes us anything, do they?" she looked inquiringly at Papa. She left her laundry and scurried off to the post office. She returned with a large box. Father put the parcel on the table, and we children eagerly crowded around.

"Besides this, I received five gold rubles," rejoiced Mama. "I am amazed at how merciful our God is! He sends everything just in time!"

Papa opened the parcel.

"What beautiful boots!" cried Vera.

"Okay, Mama, try them on! You didn't even dream about this, but God took care of you."

"They look too small for me." Mama still had her doubts.

"God never makes mistakes!" observed Papa, as he pulled children's shoes and boots out of the box and gave them to us exultant children.

We reveled in the novelty of each having new shoes that fit just right. Mama's boots fit her perfectly, too.

Then Papa got a metal container out of the parcel. He lifted the lid, and we all saw a whole lot of little cubes, wrapped in shiny paper. They smelled good, but I could not identify exactly what it was. Each cube was light and hard. Without thinking, I licked a cube. It tasted salty.

"These, Sonny, are bouillon cubes. We will put them in boiling water and they will make very good bouillon, exactly what you asked of God. Just see, children, how wonderfully God hears our prayers and answers them!"

"How sudden this all is! How unexpected!" Mama just could not calm herself.

"Now, Mama, take the girls and go to the store and use the money that was sent to us to buy a doll with eyes that close. Whatever is left over, use to buy cream buns!" Papa urged her.

"Are you sure that is wise? Why, with this much money we could buy a lot of food. Plus, there are so many needy people nowadays."

"God gave this money to the children," Papa corrected her. "Can we spend it for anything but for what it was given?"

It was difficult for Mother to agree with such a decision, but she did not argue.

In Leningrad there was a special store in which one could use foreign currency to buy food and certain articles of clothing quite cheaply. Mama, Nadia, and Vera left to go there.

By the time they returned, plates of the delicious-smelling broth that Papa had prepared were sitting on the table. He said, "Children, first of all, we must thank our heavenly Father for His great love to us. He fulfilled our desires and sent us what we requested. May we always remember the many mercies of our Lord and eternally glorify Him."

While we were all sitting around the table and eating, Papa arose. "Children, we have such an unexpected holiday today! Let's invite your friends whose fathers have been arrested and give them supper. But most important, let's tell them about today's miracle, about the might of God, and about His power and love."

We were very glad at the thought of all being together. I remember that there were very many children at our place that evening. Separation from their fathers had left its heavy marks on their faces. However, children, even in sorrow, remain children. The joyful spirit of our family was quickly translated to them, and we sang together, recited poems, and played. There was not even a crumb left from the cream buns.

"This morning I told my children that I did not even have one kopeck to buy at least bread for them," Papa told the merry children. "But we prayed and asked God Himself to feed us. God, in His great generosity, sent so much that there was enough for you also. That is how great our God is!" exclaimed Papa with emotion. "My dear children, don't forget how God answered our unusual prayer. Love Him above all and serve only Him with a pure heart."

The children began getting dressed to go home. Papa wrapped up three or four bullion cubes and gave them to each of the children. He put the empty container where everyone could see it and said, "May it always remind us that God's storehouses are open for us!"

In 1938 Papa was arrested, and on August 16, 1940, he died in prison camp in the city of Tavda. He left his wife and four children in God's care, for he believed that God, the Father of the fatherless and widows, would take care of everything.

World War II began. Leningrad was besieged, and the food reserves were depleted. Bread was rationed with rationing cards. Daily, many people died of starvation. Why did our whole family survive? The answer is simple: God's storehouses were open for us. It was a miracle that our family did not die of starvation. The heavenly Father fed us from His treasure houses.

* * * * * * * *

In 1996 I visited several churches in America. After the service in one of the churches in California, a woman about my age came up to me and joyfully greeted me, "Meesha, do you remember me?"

I shook my head, but I realized that she knew me well.

"Do you remember that evening that we each had a cream bun, and your father sent a few bullion cubes home with each of us?"

Sixty years had passed; nonetheless, the memory of that evening had not left her.

Repentance

I count myself fortunate to have been born into a family of godly Christians. My parents taught me to love God from childhood.

My mother had very little education, but she was a very God-fearing woman. She strove to instill within me a love for reading the Word of God and a zeal for attending church services. She was also deeply concerned about my morals. Now I am amazed; I wonder how she could cope with all the responsibilities in our family. I have seen many mothers who were more educated, qualified, and had more financial means. But they were unable to influence their children, and the elements of this world swallowed them.

I often ask myself the question: How were my parents able to implant a deep faith and love for the Lord in us? For many of my childhood years (1936–1946) there were no services for us to attend. I believe that the following promise was fulfilled in the salvation of my family: *"And the Lord said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house in the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation"* (Genesis 1:7). God never disappoints the person who hates his own life for God's sake. The prayers of my parents and their righteous life came up as a memorial before God, and He sent a spirit of repentance into our hearts. May the name of the Lord be blessed!

I became a Christian at the age of seventeen. I made the conscious step of giving myself to the Lord, desiring only that He would keep me in purity and holiness all the days of my earthly life. I did not choose the narrow path of Christ because it leads to riches or earthly fame. I chose it because of what I saw in the example of the lives of my parents: I understood that this is the only path that leads to life eternal in Christ Jesus.

In my private prayers I asked the Lord to send me the New Birth, and then I waited for Him to answer my prayer. One day my mother came home with three books: *Heroes of Faith*, *Barabbas*, and *Kamo Gradeshi?* I began to read them in this order. When I read about the fires lit by Nero's orders, by which Christians were burned while tied to a cross, the Spirit prompted me to pray to God. I knelt down and prayed, but I was not broken. I knelt down the second time and in deep emotion pled with

God to give me sincere repentance. I got up from my knees again without having received what I had requested. However, the Spirit prompted me to pray the third time. This time the Lord gave me tears of brokenness, and the Holy Spirit came into my heart. My joy knew no bounds! For the first time, I glorified the Lord because He had written my name in the book of life, and I was a child of God. I very plainly remember that evening—December 7, 1949—when the Lord touched my heart.

I remember that in my prayer I said, "Sovereign Lord, take control of me as Your own possession, and prepare me to be a submissive tool in Your hands."

Not long before that, I had heard a sermon on the verse, *"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me"* (Psalm 23:4). That sermon deeply touched me. I continued praying. "Lord, You are my Shepherd forever, and I am forever Your sheep. May Your rod be always in Your hand. When I am in danger, defend me from my enemies. And when I turn from Your path by reason of some enticement, fear in the face of difficulties, or any other reason, then, Lord, use Your rod and direct me back onto the right way. If ever through the depravity of my heart I say otherwise, then I ask You, sovereign Lord, that today's union may be an eternal union of faithfulness between You, my Lord, and me, Your servant."

I prayed this prayer in private behind a closed door, and my Lord which sees in secret rewarded me openly.

During the fifty years that I have served Him, never once did I doubt that I belonged to Him.

Dear children, have you ever fully surrendered yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ? Surrender to Him all the interests and goals of your life, and He will bless you in every good work.

Bad News

I would like to share some of my memories of Mama that have made a large impact on my spiritual life. Formerly, I supposed that the death of a mother was especially tragic for small children. However, through the years I have come to understand that children of all ages need their mothers.

It is difficult to describe my mother's life. No matter what words I choose, I already know that I will not be able to relate my feelings, and words cannot express that of which she is worthy. We should write thank-you letters to living mothers. A grateful heart is the most precious gift a child can give to his mother. I know many beautiful hymns and poems articulating tender love to mothers, but so often this is from bitter regrets and from a love that is too late. People tend to not value what they have.

My sweet mother was a simple woman, but she was a God-fearing Christian. She went to a parish school for only two years in the province of Tverd. She became an orphan when she was five. First her father died, and then her mother died—leaving twelve orphans behind!

In 1911 my mother and her brother Vasily were brought to St. Petersburg. There they were taken in by a family of gilders. Vasily became a skillful gilder. He gilded the Isaakiyevsky cathedral and the Petropavlovsky fortress with gold leaf. My mother mastered the craft of embroidering with gold. At first she embroidered priests' robes with gold, and later she worked on military banners and epaulets.

Mama often talked about the godly man through whom she came to know the Lord. She had become acquainted with this man in the hospital where she worked as a janitor. During the years of 1923 and 1924, typhus raged in Russia. The sick were transported out of St. Petersburg to the city of Bubrusk. Mama accompanied them to care for them. The conductor of the train car was a young Christian, Trifon Stepanovich Sviridenok (he was executed as a Christian in 1937). Mama noticed how obliging he was to the sick, and how he never missed a chance to witness for the Lord while helping them. Sometimes the train would stop for a long time at certain stations. During the stop, Trifon Stepanovich would go somewhere alone to pray. Mama began asking him questions, and he explained to her the way of salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He also invited her to attend church services in St. Petersburg. In 1924 she entered the House of the Gospel on the 24th Line, Vasilyevsky Island, for the first time.

Mama testifies that her faith in the Lord matured gradually. She was raised in an Orthodox family, so the Gospel truth in its saving simplicity caused her to doubt. In 1925 she repented and received holy water baptism.

Mama lived in St. Petersburg her whole life, and was also buried there.

The day before my arrest, I visited Mama, never suspecting that this would be our last visit. She was always talkative and loved discussions. Sitting together at the table, I asked her, "Mama, you lived through many things, but what was the most difficult thing in your life?"

Her answer was unexpected. I thought she would tell about her childhood as an orphan, how she became a widow, about the horrors she experienced in Leningrad during the siege, how she reared four young children by herself, etc. But I heard nothing of the sort.

She answered something like this: "The best memories I have are of the hard times, because the Lord quickly came to my aid in times of sorrow. When a traveler finally reaches his destination, he is not burdened by the memory of the obstacles he bore. Now I understand that I have accomplished the task that the Lord has given me.

"I have raised my children; they are all members of the church. The hardest thing for me now is waiting to be transferred into eternity. Son, I have a great desire that the Lord would come for me soon. . . ." She was very sick at the time.

Seventy-five days after this conversation, Mama passed into eternity. My sisters gave me a detailed account of how she calmly—I would say, even courageously—passed on. She died on March 5, 1970. At that time I was in a Kishinev prison.

"I have brought you sad news," the investigator informed me. "Your mother died in the beginning of this month."

"Where is my wife?"

"In the hospital."

"In what way is she sick?"

"I don't know."

"Who's taking care of the children?"

"I'll find out."

This news disheartened me. I asked to be taken back to my cell. At such times I sought comfort in God. I trusted the Lord through the grief that was my lot.

Childhood Impressions

When the Bible speaks about a king, we can always find the name of that king's mother. We know more about the mothers of Moses and Samuel than we do about their fathers. Undoubtedly, mothers have an awesome influence on their children, although the New Testament proclaims another truth: *"And ye fathers. . . bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord"* (Ephesians 6:4). For a long time I could not understand why the image of my father was so clearly imprinted on my young memory. I saw him very little. I was six years old when we parted—to never see each other on earth again. However, my dream was always to be able to live the way my father had lived. Whenever I met somebody who knew my father well, I would ply them with questions. And recently, I finally understood why I loved my father so much.

Mama, as I remember, quite often talked to us about Papa and always held him up to us as an example. I know more about my father than about Mama from her stories. Just like a powerful projector that sends a bright ray of light onto an object, she clearly illuminated the image of Papa in our minds while she herself stayed in the shadows. A wise mother always upholds the authority of the father in the eyes of the children. And that is what Mama did.

Oh, wise mothers! They are always least interested in their own authority and image. Their whole life is consecrated to their children, but their children so rarely return love for love.

On December 19, 1938, I turned seven. I remember that birthday very well. Mama invited ten children from families of prisoners for my birthday party.

We moved the big table out into the center of the room. We set the table and put the food out. All the guests found their places, but the chair at the head of the table remained empty. Before prayer, Mama explained. "No one may sit on this chair," she said. "Our papa will sit here. Although he is far away from us, he will invisibly be here with us."

The moment I heard that, I immediately went and sat on the empty chair.

"Why did you do that, Sonny?" asked Mama in bewilderment. "I thought we had agreed that today our dear Papa is going to sit on this chair."

"Mama," I pled, "please let me pretend that I am sitting on Papa's lap today."

Mama did not have the heart to deny me that, so I sat on Papa's chair that whole evening.

Evacuating Leningrad

Jesus said, *"Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life"* (Mark 10:29, 30).

These promises of Jesus may cause many people to doubt. How can we say that we became a hundredfold richer when we became Christians? Based on the experience of my family, I want to testify that this promise of Jesus is as valid and true as all His other promises!

The reason that no one in our family died of starvation was not that we had extensive reserves, but that my papa faithfully served the Lord till the end of his life. If we had inherited from him a large estate or a lot of money, we may have shared the fate of many who died of starvation during the siege. But God is true to His

Shostakovich 7th symphony

Word. He took special care of us. Our family was miraculously taken out of Leningrad, and we were saved.

The blockade lasted nine hundred days. Even the residential sectors of the city were hit by the planes that bombed day and night. The Bodayeva warehouses, where the food reserves for the whole city were stored, were destroyed. Butter flowed down the streets of the city and soaked into the ground. In 1941 a famine began in this city with its three million inhabitants. In desperation, the people began to eat the ground that had been saturated with butter.

Railway communication with the city was disrupted. The only way to get food to the besieged city of Leningrad was by truck across the ice of Ladozhskoye Lake. These same military trucks then would take the wounded and the families of the soldiers out of the city. They called the road across the lake the Road of Life. In January of 1942 our family was able to leave the city by this route.

During the war my mother allowed a woman with two young children to live with us in our small room because a bomb had destroyed the woman's house. Ten days later, her husband, a Czech army lieutenant, returned from the front. His name was Vatslav. Grateful for what my mother had done for his wife, he took us out of Leningrad, along with his own family, in a military truck.

I well remember the day of our evacuation. Military vehicles were waiting for us on the shore of Ladozhskoye Lake. Mama took with her only the most valuable things she owned. My three sisters, who were a little bit stronger than I, followed her single file as we headed toward the shore. I managed to go only a short way before falling into the snow. I simply was too weak to get up. Mama looked back. When she saw me lying in the snow, she came back. She said, "Meesha dear, get up. We have only one more kilometer to the shore where the trucks are waiting for us."

But I couldn't even raise my head. So she left what she was carrying. Instead, she put me on her shoulders and carried me.

I am awed when I think of all the hardships my mother underwent. She carried me for so long! And only on December 7, 1949 (the day of my spiritual birth), she said that now she can let me go. For all those years she had uncomplainingly carried me in her arms of prayer.

Oh, the feats of love and faith of which mothers are capable for the sake of their children!

It was a thirty-five-kilometer drive across the Ladozhskoye Lake. We were part of a long convoy of trucks. It was very cold, and to keep us from freezing, Mama covered us children with a blanket. Along the way we met many holes and large cracks in the ice. To get over them, the soldiers made jumps by piling up snow in front of the crack and pouring water over the pile of snow so it would freeze hard. Then the trucks would get speed and go across the cracks. There were no doors in the cabs of the trucks—a canvas was hung in their place so that if the truck went down, the driver could get out. In such cases, as a rule, the passengers all died.

That day we passed through the valley of the shadow of death. The column was under fire, and planes dropped bombs on us. The majority of the vehicles disappeared under the ice, but God protected our vehicle. It was one of the few that was protected from all the dangers and safely reached the opposite shore. It was only by a miracle that we were still alive.

Soldiers on the other shore of the lake met us. The first thing I thought of when I heard dogs barking was that a person could survive here! The people had eaten all the dogs and cats in Leningrad during the famine.

After we had crossed the lake, Vatslav said to Mama, "I have done everything for you that I could. Now you must decide where you will go." As a farewell gift, he presented us with a document that gave us the rights of a soldier's family. Based on this document, we were entitled to free food for six children at any train station.

For a month and twenty days we traveled in cattle cars to Central Asia. The larger stations had cafeterias where evacuees were given meals free of charge. As soon as the train stopped, Mama took two pots and made her way under train cars and across railroad tracks over to the station. There she would get a meal for us in the cafeteria. She would bring back bread, a pot of soup, and even a pot of porridge or potatoes—all this at a time when many people were starving! Our heavenly Father took care of everything.

When the train stopped at a station, nobody ever knew how long it would be there. There was always the danger of being left behind. Once when Mama came back to where the train had been stopped, it was not there anymore! She had no way of knowing where to go and where to look for us. In great agitation, she asked people who were passing by if they knew where the train was. One person was able to tell her. How glad she was to be able to find us! Many parents who missed the train never saw their children again.

Truly, the mercies of God are innumerable! If Jesus Christ said that each of his followers would receive a hundredfold more on this earth, we can be confident that He will be faithful to His Word. Nonetheless, we may not think that the believer will not have cares or troubles. But God's blessings will go with us, and that is better than money.

Lessons From My Mother's Prayers

Mama taught me to pray—which may have been the best thing she ever did for me! That may seem incredulous, but I will try to prove it by using examples from my life.

It was cold that winter of 1941. During the blockage, our room was not heated. In fact, none of the apartments in Leningrad were heated. We four children lay together on one bed under a blanket, expecting at any moment to pass into eternity.

Mama worked in the hospital. When she would return early in the morning, she would come over to our bed and check to make sure we were still living. Seeing that the mercy of the Lord had kept us safe, she would kneel down beside the bed. We would crawl out of bed with difficulty and kneel beside her. The youngest would pray first, and so on up the line to the oldest. I do not remember what I prayed about, but I remember that Mama always repeated the same phrase in each prayer, "Lord, I thank You that You love us so much!" When we would finish praying, I would get back under the covers as quickly as I could and wonder, "Why did Mama say that the Lord loves us so much? If she had at least brought a piece of bread home with her, I might understand. No, she comes home empty-handed, and still she prays about the Lord loving us so much." My young mind concluded that it must be because we soon would pass into eternity where everything is so good.

Day after day passed like that while the siege lasted. By the mercies of the Lord, in 1942 our family was evacuated from Leningrad, and we were spared from starvation. For years we wandered without a house to call our own. But Mama was amazingly constant in always having family prayer together on our knees at the end of each day.

To this day I remember how we traveled in cattle cars all the way out to Central Asia. Mama had no definite destination in mind. Her only desire was to find a place where there was bread and a warm place to live. One beautiful day in February our train stopped at a small station. Another freight train had stopped on the adjacent tracks. The train cars were packed full of recruits being taken to the front. We curiously peered at the men in military uniforms.

Seeing Mama surrounded by four children, an officer asked, “Where are you from, and where are you going?”

“From Leningrad to Central Asia.”

“To whom?”

“Wherever the Lord directs.”

When he found out that Mama was a widow, that we did not have any relatives in Central Asia, and that we had left all our possessions in the besieged city of Leningrad, he was touched by our plight. He pulled a notebook out of his pocket and hastily wrote something on one of the pages. Handing the piece of paper to Mama, he instructed her, “Please go to Frunze (present-day Bishkek) and find this address. Give this paper to the director, and she will take you in. The children can live in the children’s home, and they will find work for you.”

Mama gratefully accepted the paper. The train slowly rumbled out of the station. Mama accepted such kindness from a stranger as the heavenly Father’s care of orphans and widows. Now she knew where to go. In Tashkent we switched trains, and in April 1942 we arrived in Frunze. With little difficulty, Mama found the children’s home.

“Would it be possible for me to place my children here?” Mama addressed the receptionist. “I am a widow, and we have been evacuated from Leningrad.”

“Absolutely not! Our children’s home is for children who have lost both parents. We have no vacancies."

Then Mama asked to see the lady whose name was on the piece of paper. She came out and read the note, and then joyfully invited us into her office. I do not know what her relation was to that officer, whether mother, wife, sister, or daughter, but she was very interested in our case.

"Beginning tomorrow you can assume the responsibility of laundry woman. We will assign the children rooms, and be assured, they will be fed well," promised the kind lady.

Mama was satisfied. Finally this prisoner's family, exhausted from its wanderings, would find rest, a warm place to live, and food to eat. We scarcely remembered such a life. She began to fill out the necessary documents. Mama handed the lady the children's birth certificates.

"I'm not sure what to do. You have three girls and one boy. Our children's home is only for girls." After pondering the situation for a while, she suggested, "Not far from here is a children's home for boys. I'm sure I can arrange it with the director to have the boy placed there. You'll be here nearby."

"No, the children must stay together," sadly, but decisively, Mama replied.

"I am sorry, but I cannot do that."

"Then I will have to leave," Mama stated calmly and firmly.

"But look! You'll see your son every day."

"The children must stay together."

Mama thanked the lady for her kindness, and then said good-bye. We left the children's home.

For many long years we wandered about without a roof over our heads. Later, when I was an adult, I remembered this episode and asked Mama, "Why didn't you want to stay at the children's home? We all would have had it so nice there. When we left, we had nowhere to go."

"Sonny," Mama explained, "how could we have had our evening prayer without you? No, it is important that the whole family prays to God together."

Only then did I understand the care of a mother's heart. She refused to place the children in separate children's homes; instead, she continued to wander, simply so that the whole family could pray together each evening. By doing that, she maintained the fire on the family altar.

One bitter night, while wandering through Kirgizia, Mama knocked at the window of a house. A lady looked out.

"Who is there?"

"Please give us a place to sleep."

"How many of you?"

"Four children and I."

"I don't have room for such a big family."

We walked a short distance away from the house to an intersection. There Mama chose the driest spot she could find and lay our only blanket on it. We sat on the blanket, snuggling close to each other to preserve as much heat as possible. We expected to sit that way the whole night. A freezing wind was blowing off the snow-covered mountains.

Before we went to sleep, Mama, like she always did, said, "Children, let's thank the Lord that He helped us get this far." We knelt down right there on the street. I forget what I prayed, but Mama prayed the same thing she always did, "Lord, You love us so much!" I could not understand what she meant. Nobody gave us a place to sleep, and she still thought that the Lord loved us so much. We could not figure out why Mama thanked the Lord.

Twenty minutes later, the door of the unwelcoming house opened and the lady came out. "Come in, and I'll make you beds on the floor. Ever since I refused to let you in, I just wasn't able to go to sleep."

We made our beds on the floor and were very glad that the Lord was a present help in time of trouble.

The next morning we set off again in search of a place to live. Years passed before I began to pray Mama's prayer and understood that God is love.

In the autumn of 1942 we stayed with a single woman in Kirgizia for a while. Late one evening she went to her bed in her room. We also got ready to go to bed. Before our bedtime prayer, Mama always asked, "Is anyone's conscience condemning them for some wrong deed? Have you offended anyone? Are you free from all sinful secrets?" After she made sure that all was well, she would pray. However, this evening she had something new. She said, "Children, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, I want you to think carefully beforehand. If you committed even the smallest wrong or offended anyone in any way, which means you have also offended the Lord, then do not pray the words "Hallowed be Thy name." If your conscience does not condemn you about anything, then pray the whole prayer without skipping any words."

I recalled the wrongs I had done during the day, and I omitted the words "Hallowed be Thy name." We all lay down to go to sleep. Fifteen minutes later Mama called me out to the hall.

"Son, what happened? What is bothering you?"

I told her everything. That day I had climbed down into the cellar and took two canned tomatoes from the barrel and ate them. (Of course, I did that without the owner's permission.) Mama made sure she understood everything correctly, and then she sent me to the owner to apologize.

We never dared question Mama's instructions, so I went. After hearing my apology, the owner went out and talked to Mama. Years later, I learned that she was amazed at such a confession, and allowed our family to eat her canned goods whenever we desired.

Shortly after that, Mama got a job at a sugar factory, and we were given a room in which to live. However, that did not last long. That summer, locusts devoured the whole beet crop, and the sugar factory shut down. The same fate befell the wheat fields. The stores issued bread only with cards. Although we had cards, there was nothing to buy.

We gathered up our meager belongings (a few pillows and two blankets) and on the advice of some kind friends, decided to go to Ukraine to Poltavskaya oblast. We did not always have a bed to sleep in; our stomachs were not always full; sometimes we suffered from hunger; and we walked barefoot through snow. But God kept us safe, and in 1946 we returned to Leningrad. The most important thing I learned during my years of wandering was to love the Lord and thank Him for everything. Mama taught me that.

For my first summer vacation after I turned eighteen, I went to far-off Kirgizia to where we had been evacuated. I found that same intersection where Mama prayed that prayer that I did not understand, and there, from the depths of my heart I prayed, "Lord, truly, You are love! Truly, Your ways are above ours! We don't always understand what You are doing, but You are love. That is the one conclusion I come to when I consider Your working with each of us."

As he walks through the valley of the shadow of death, each Christian will find sources of rich blessings hidden there. After all his wanderings, he will say from the bottom of his heart, "Truly, God is love!"

Mama not only taught us to thank God for everything, she also corrected and changed the content of our prayers. She was always extremely tactful about this. To this day, it amazes me how such a poorly-educated woman could find so many different ways of reaching our hearts.

Often children think that their parents are worrying too much about them and are always nagging them about this and that. I tried always to be open with Mama and not hide anything from her. Dear children, are you always open with your parents? You cannot reveal your heart and share your secrets with just anybody. However, your parents are the ones with whom you should be open.

Even after we had grown up, Mama still wanted to pray with us. She was concerned that our prayers would not become a formal repetition of memorized words. She would leave all her housework and attentively listen to our prayers, so as to detect the condition of our spirit. There were exceptions, but they were few.

It is sad when the home becomes a dormitory, where each family member has his own prayer corner. May it not be that way in your home. The Christian home should have one altar to God on which the whole family offers the sweet-smelling sacrifice of evening prayer. Dear children, do you always enjoy family devotions?

The Forerunner

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Matthew 3:3).

Once I was asked, "What did your mother do so that you would be strong in the faith?" That question brought to my mind John the Baptist. Why did he die so early? He was beheaded at the age of thirty. I believe it was because he had already accomplished his mission. He had prepared the way of the Lord in the hearts of people. That was all that was required of him.

Having a degree in theology to prepare the soil of people's hearts to accept Jesus Christ is not necessary, although there is a great advantage in studying the Word of God. It is of primary importance to experience the power of God in one's life, be regenerated, and live a godly life. Without that, witnessing for Christ is impossible.

Christ sends someone to proclaim to us the news of salvation. Somebody had to put forth effort so that I could accept Christ into my heart and be saved. Dear children, do you know your forerunner, the person who brought to you the news of salvation? I am certain that my forerunner was my mother. She prepared the way of the Lord in my heart. She spoke so much and so convincingly to me about Christ that I could not remain indifferent to Him. She nurtured a love for Christ in my life. She did everything possible so that I would be born again.

When I was young, I wanted to learn to play on the domra.[13] Mama did not object to my desire, and I was accepted into the class of folk instruments in the Pioneer Palace Music Studio. One Sunday there was a concert in the Volodarsky Culture Hall.[14]

"Son, it's Sunday, the Lord's Day, the day to go to church, not to concerts," Mama tried to dissuade me.

"Mama, if I would not have a solo, I would not go. But with my solo, I have to go, or I will ruin the whole concert," I objected.

"Okay, you may go, but I will pray for you."

I was glad that in our family we could solve conflicting issues so easily. I thought to myself, "You may pray all you want; just don't get in my way." That day (I was only sixteen) I experienced the power of a mother's prayer. I parted with her at the tram stop. She went to church, and I went to the concert.

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[13] Domra: A Russian stringed folk instrument.

[14] Culture hall: A public building where various activities such as official celebrations, concerts, etc. are conducted.

The performance of the folk instrument orchestra of which I was a part was the last in the program. I sat in the first row on the stage and played the domra (an alto part). To my right sat those who played on small domras; to the left, those who played on balalaikas,[15] and behind, those who played on double basses. The curtain was raised and the light of powerful projectors was directed onto the stage. The orchestra began to play Russian folk songs. While we were playing the song "Along Down Our Mother, the Volga,"[16] craftsmen sitting in the audience began to shoot bent nails out of slingshots at us musicians. One nail flew past my head, barely missing me, hit the wall, and fell to the floor. I was terrified! What if a nail hit me in my eye? I could not shut my eyes, but I did not know what to do. I felt like running away. As I continued playing, I silently prayed, "Lord, keep me safe. Forgive me for my disobedience. On the Lord's Day I am not in the house of God, but in the assembly of the wicked. If You keep me safe, I promise to stop playing in the orchestra." The concert ended, and the curtain was lowered. I handed my instrument to the director of the orchestra and said, "This is the last concert in my life."

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[15] Balalaika: A Russian stringed folk instrument.

[16] Volga: A river in western Russia. The longest river in Europe.

I trudged home, bleak and lonely. Mama had left church early. By the time I got home, she already had dinner waiting for me. "Well, Son, did you feel that I was praying for you?" she asked with a kind smile.

"Yes, I did," I replied. She did not even ask me how I felt that she was praying for me, and I did not tell her what had happened at the concert. That taught me a lesson that I remembered for the rest of my life. You cannot run away or hide from the prayers of your mother.

Later, I became a father, and there were times that because of my ministry I was separated from my family for a length of time. However, I always strove to pray in faith for my children as my mother had taught me. I asked the Lord and believed that He would keep them from sinful pleasures and dangerous paths that corrupt young souls. Often in my life I have seen that such prayers carry special strength. The Lord is able to do that which we are not.

My mother nurtured within me a love for reading the Word of God. One day when I was seventeen and not yet converted, I came home from work, exhausted.

"Son," Mama said to me, "supper isn't quite ready yet. While I peel the potatoes, read to me from the Bible."

"Mom, why don't I peel the potatoes, and you can read the Bible," I offered, trying to evade having to read the Bible.

"Well, I don't have my glasses on, and I read so slowly. It would be boring for you to listen to me reading syllable by syllable! Son, I want to listen to you!"

What could I do? Reluctantly I reached for the Bible.

"What do you want me to read?" I asked.

"You can start with the Sermon on the Mount," she replied.

The Sermon on the Mount is three chapters long, and that was only to start with! Feeling like a martyr, I began to read. I read clumsily, and it was evident that I was not enjoying myself. As I read, Mama explained and commented on various verses. By the time I had read chapters five, six, and seven, I could not be stopped anymore. I read the eighth and the ninth chapters; I wanted to find out what would happen next.

The potatoes were ready, and Mama invited everybody to the table, but I could not tear myself away from the Bible. My eyes hungrily drank in the holy words. My sisters sat to a delicious supper, but I went into another room to continue reading. For the first time in my life, I experienced a true love for the Bible. From that time on, the Bible has been my favorite book. It was my mother who revealed to me the beauty of the Word of the Lord. She was like a forerunner in bringing me to Christ.

As a presbyter, I once traveled to the Far East to visit the churches there. While I was waiting for a ship at the harbor in Khabarovsk,[17] I began a conversation with a young man. He was headed north to the gold mines.

"You've traveled a long way!" I marveled.

"Well, it's because of the situation in my family," sighed the young man.

"You're so young! Surely you would not have had to leave your family and friends and go to the Far North just to earn money?"

"You would have run away from my mother, too!" answered the youth, evidently seeking sympathy.

"Is she a drunkard, and doesn't care for you?"

"No, she's too holy. It's impossible to live with her. She nags me about every little thing I do, grumbles that I don't believe in God, and cries because she says that I will go to hell without God. The minute I walk in the door she starts singing her holy songs or reads the Bible aloud."

"Surely that wouldn't force you to leave home?"

"It sure did! I told her that I am never going to be a believer. I said, 'You go your way, Mother, and I'll go mine.' She began to cry and went into her room. I couldn't sleep that night. I saw that her room light was on, which meant that she wasn't sleeping, either. After a while I decided to see what she was doing at this hour of the night. I peeked in, and I saw her on her knees praying.

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[17] Khabarovsk: A city on the east coast of Russia.

That was nothing unusual. I went back to bed and thought little of it. At 4:00 that morning I looked again. She was still on her knees. I decided that if my mother had to pray that long, then evidently I was too much for her. I realized I had to leave immediately! Leaving her a note saying that I had gone looking for work, I left at 6:00."

"Why are you trying to run away from the prayers of your mother? You'll never be able to do that. Prayer is such an omnipresent power that there is no place to hide from it, not even under the earth or on the other side of the world. Prayer will reach you anywhere!"

"What, are you a believer too?!" the disgruntled youth exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Not again!" he muttered as he clenched his fists in frustration.

"What do you mean, 'not again'?" I asked.

"I've only been traveling two weeks yet, and you are the third believer who has met me!" the young man indignantly cried as he walked away from me.

He had been planning to travel on the same boat as I, but when boarding began, he continued to nervously pace the dock. It became clear to me that he was not planning to go farther. Possibly he did not relish the thought of traveling with me, or possibly he had decided not to travel any farther and planned to return home. At any rate, his mother's prayers were directing the heart of this rebellious son. Her prayers would take effect as long as she prayed in faith. She was a true forerunner for her son.

There are many families in which souls have not accepted Jesus. Forerunners (prayer warriors) can make a big difference in their future acceptance of Christ if you patiently continue your inconspicuous work of love. Live holy lives so that those around you see the power of God working in you. Do everything possible on your part, and Christ will accomplish the rest.

"The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail"

There were twenty-eight Evangelical Christian churches and fifteen Baptist[18] churches in Leningrad in the 1920s. The whirlwind of persecution that came in 1929 swept them all away.

My parents attended the Baptist church on Vasilyevsky Island (building #11 on Line 24). The church house was built in 1905 by V. A. Fetler, a well-known preacher. (After the Revolution, Fetler was exiled from Russia.) The ministers' families, including ours, lived on the third floor of the church house.

In 1929 the church house was confiscated. The ministers' families residing on third floor were evacuated. We were given a communal apartment, where we lived with three other families. The church was changed into a factory. The new owners wrote "Religion is the opium of the people" on the front of the former church house. To this day, concrete walls surround the building.

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[18] The Evangelical Christian and Baptist churches later were fused to create what exists today: the Evangelical Christians-Baptist churches.

In the 1930s before confiscating a church house, the authorities tried to make it look like the church was dispersing by itself. To achieve this goal, early Monday morning they arrested the brother who had moderated the service the Sunday before. The next Sunday another brother took his place, and the same fate befell him. That was repeated week after week. Their logic was simple. They planned that the Sunday would come when there were no more brothers willing to stand behind the pulpit. This, in turn, would, of course, cause the church to fall apart. Nevertheless, that Sunday never came for the Leningrad church! Each Sunday another self-sacrificing brother stood in the gap in spite of the threat of arrest. Most of these sacrificial brothers never returned from exile and prison camp.

After the arrest of my father, Mama took the spiritual training of us children upon herself. She conducted services with us at home. Every Sunday she gathered us together to read the Word of God. She would move the table over beside the window, and we sat around it. For some reason she always read the same verse, *"I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"* (Matthew 16:18). Mama kept a silk bookmark at that place in her Bible. The next Sunday she read the same verse and explained, "Children, what a happy time we live in! Today is Sunday, and we have nowhere to go to pray to God. The people who took Papa away from us and closed the doors of our church house think that they have defeated the church. Still, the Lord says, *'The gates of hell shall not prevail against it'*! The Word of the Lord will be fulfilled! Today everything has been destroyed. There are no preachers and no ministers. Our church houses have been confiscated. However, as you grow up, watch carefully, and you will see the church revive. Dear children, remember that the church will never die. For Christ said, *'The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'*"

Ever since my childhood I have loved that verse, and in faith I have anticipated the revival of the church. After I grew up, I understood that the meaning of Mama's life and her heart's desire consisted of that promise. It was her goal to see all her children members of the church. She believed that the church would regain its strength and rise from ruin. This verse became the cornerstone of her efforts to bring up her children for the Lord. During those years there were not even church services in homes, but the church still lived.

Shortly after that, World War II began. Suffering and terror revived religious feelings in people, especially those who had at one time attended church or were in some way connected to believers. Believers quickly flocked from all over Leningrad to the new church house on Okhota Street opened in 1946. People stood in the aisles and in several rows outside the building. Such was the hunger to hear the Word of the Lord. By 1950 there were approximately three thousand members!

Nevertheless, in 1946 atheism continued its evil work at the altars of God. Akim Isaacovich Chizhov was the presbyter of the Leningrad church. He was arrested in 1948 and never returned from prison. On the first Sunday after his arrest, believers asked one another in hushed tones, "Where is Chizhov?" One by one they learned the sad news, "He was arrested yesterday. He was called in for questioning and was not released." Soon all the believers knew about it, yet they did not openly pray for him at the service. Shortly after that, the government authorities appointed another presbyter, Karpov, in place of Chizhov. Karpov later moved to Moscow to lead the AUECB.[19]

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[19] AUECB: All-Union Conference of Evangelical Christian Baptists (the registered church).

During those years, no one requested prayer at church for prisoners. That would have been alien to the spirit of the churches of that time.[20] After Stalin's persecution, all the believers lived in fear.

Fifteen weary years of waiting passed after the opening of the church on Okhota Street till the Lord answered the prayer of many sorrowing hearts. In 1961 the church regained its strength, freed itself from the spirit of fear, and restored the Gospel command, "*Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them*" (Hebrews 13:3).

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[20] Publishers note: Many different people were present at services, and one never knew when spies or betrayers might turn him in if he identified with those "criminals."

The Blessings of Suffering

When I was a youth in the Leningrad church, I had a deep concern for other youth. Mama understood that my zeal possibly would result in my arrest. However, seeing the difficult situation in which the church was, she said, "Son, fear nothing in this life! There is no better lot for the Christian than being faithful to Christ! Many have already given their lives for the sake of the Gospel. Your father remained faithful and therefore did not return from prison. Fear nothing! There are those who will bring you a parcel and pray to God for you."

I did not dream of occupying some important position in the church. However, I had a great desire to preach the Gospel. The Lord helped me. I started by making special effort to talk with newcomers and lonely people after church. Usually these were university students, craftsmen, soldiers, or sailors. Gradually, a very close youth group developed.

We put forth effort to grow, both in our knowledge of the Word of God and in good works. Yet, preaching the Gospel was the priority. Usually this did not consist of preaching as such, but heart-to-heart discussions about the Word of God. I never even thought about preaching the news of salvation for material gain. Actually, it worked the opposite for me; I spent much for the sake of the holy Gospel.

Years passed. I was arrested for the first time in Moscow in May 1966. I was held in isolation in Lefortovsky Prison and was interrogated there. Each Monday Mama would come from Leningrad to Moscow and would sit on a bench by the prison wall. She sat there for the whole week. Saturday she would return to Leningrad, but Monday she was always back on her bench by the prison wall. Sometimes in her naiveness she would request of the prison officers, "Please give this food to my son Meesha. Do you know him?" Every once in a while, because of her insistence, they would take the food, but it never got to me. The believers at whose place she stayed asked her, "Agrippina Mikhailovna, why do you go to the prison every day? You know you will not be able to see your son or even give him a parcel. Besides that, you are not young anymore."

She answered, "It helps my son when I am near."

I believe that only mothers can understand her words and actions. I do not know how close that bench was to my cell, but Mama realized that her nearness was communicated to my spirit through the prison walls.

My court case took place on September 29, 1966, in the Bauman Court House in Moscow. I sat behind the barrier and was guarded by several soldiers. Mama sat in the front row and during the whole day she looked at me and smiled. Her smile was not a frivolous smile; she was reverently rejoicing for her son. How could she rejoice? Rejoicing would be natural if her son would be receiving the Nobel Prize. Yet, it gave her greater joy to see her son remain faithful to God on trial. All earthly titles and prizes are nothing in comparison with the heavenly, when Christ glorifies those who remain faithful to Him before the angels. "*Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven*" (Matthew 5:11, 12).

Mama carefully observed the court proceedings. I remember how the prosecutor addressed the judge and said, "The defendant, Khorev, is accused of organizing an illegal youth meeting in Kiev where approximately five hundred youth attended. There he played the first violin . . ."

"Shame on you for accusing my son of playing the violin! My son can only play on the mandolin," scolded Mama, reproachfully shaking her head. The room exploded in laughter. Everybody else understood what the prosecutor meant. He meant that I was the leader of that meeting and by the law was to carry full responsibility. Mama did not understand these details. Generally it was forbidden for the audience to speak during a court case. I was worried that the judge might make her leave the court room. Nevertheless, by then everyone was laughing: the judge, my escort, and the prosecutor. Only my dear mother was seriously concerned about the absurdity of the accusation of the prosecutor. She could not understand why everyone was laughing. She was always beautiful in her sincerity and naiveness.

After the court case, I was allowed a meeting with my family for half an hour. Three people came to the Lefortovsky Prison to see me: my wife, my sister, and Mama. I spoke mostly with my wife and my sister. Mama sat on a chair and just watched us. The allotted time flew by. Finally the second hand began its last round. There was one minute left. We would be parted at any moment, and Mama had not yet said anything to me. She only silently watched me and smiled. "Mama," I asked, "Why are you so quiet? Please share your thoughts."

"My dear son, how happy you must be! You know that your father was also a prisoner for the Word of the Lord and died in prison. For each son it is a sufficient honor to achieve what his father has achieved. May you be worthy to receive from the Lord this honor."

Every time I crossed the threshold of a prison, I recalled this maternal blessing.

A Letter From Prison

My dear children,

I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ! Today is December 18, 1981. It is Friday morning. Tomorrow will be my 50th birthday. In the Old Testament, the 50th year was a special year. It was the Year of Jubilee. In that year slaves, captives, and prisoners were all set free.

What can I say about my Year of Jubilee? *"But by the grace of God I am what I am."* Praise the Lord! I have lived longer than my father, even though I was arrested at the same age as my father. He was sentenced to five years in a prison camp, and so was I. He should have met his 50th birthday in prison, but the Lord's plan for his life was different from His plan for mine. I reverently accept this gift of a longer life.

If the Lord purposed to be glorified through His child being in bonds on his 50th birthday, then may the name of the Lord be blessed!

Do not worry about me. Although the chill of winter has come, I am well prepared for it.

We cannot understand all of God's ways today. However, when the Christian reaches the end of his life, he will be able to look back and exclaim, "How great You are, God, in all Your ways. Your works are mighty and wise!" But we will say those words at the end of life's path. What about now? Today, living by faith, I thank the Lord for my future. If we have surrendered our lives to the Lord, will He make mistakes or give us a cross that we cannot bear? No! Never!

Now I would like to go back in time to the beginning of my life. From former letters and stories, you already know about my father. He lived a relatively short life, but his life was a great feat of faith. My father was a minister, and he left all to follow the Lord. He died in 1939 in prison in Tavda, Sverdlovskaya oblast. He was poor, and we inherited no material goods from him. However, in spite of that, today we are richer than the richest because we know and believe in the living, true God. I am not exaggerating when I say that he was a hero of faith. I'll give an example to prove that. (I was told this story by my mother.)

The birth of a child brings great joy to the parents' hearts. You are all aware that I have had poor eyesight since birth. At my birth already, the doctors told Mama, "Your son has poor eyesight. You will only know how poor his eyesight is after he gets a bit older."

It goes without saying that the fact that I would have poor eyesight troubled Mama greatly! She had two healthy daughters, but her son was born with a handicap. My mother considered me to be blind. That day she shared her worries with Papa. Mama often talked about that day. Papa took me in his arms as soon as they got home and said, "Let's praise the Lord for the gift He has given to our family."

"We have not only joy, but also deep sorrow," objected Mama. "Our son has a serious health problem. We don't know yet, maybe he will be completely blind."

"Dear, do you agree that God does not make mistakes?"

"No, God never makes mistakes, but. . . "

Papa cut her words short and continued, "Yes, our son has health problems, but his disease is an exception. Correct?"

"Yes, but. . . "

Papa did not give her a chance to express her doubts. He exultantly concluded, "If not even one hair can fall from our head without God knowing about it, then today's happenings are in God's control. I know that the Lord has a plan for our son. It is for these special plans of His that we will praise Him."

Mama continued reminiscing. "He then read a verse from the Bible and we knelt down, holding you in our arms, and we thanked the Lord for His wonderful ways in our lives. I did not share his joy. Actually, I was quite skeptical. Of course, I did not say it aloud, but I definitely considered his reasoning to be unrealistic.

"Thirty years have passed. Papa has left us a long time ago. Only now can I join him in his reasoning, realizing that he was right. My conscience condemns me that for so long I could not understand why you have weak eyesight and poor health. If I would have the chance, I would tell Papa, 'Yes, your simple trust in God was the correct response. Forgive me that I did not understand you and furthermore, I was skeptical. . . .'"

The first time Mama told me about this was on New Year's Day of 1969. After hearing her story, I rejoiced with her and glorified the Lord in prayer: "My beloved Lord! Thirty-seven years ago my father thanked You for the special lot that was to be mine. By faith he saw into the future. I praise You for Your wonderful ways!"

My dear children! I am writing this to you to comfort you (and myself also) in our long separation. What can I say about my illness? I have always had just enough health to fulfill my ministry in the church. Your dear mother has taken all the cares of the family upon herself. Nobody knows this, but in our house I have never even hammered one nail into the wall. Because of my poor eyesight, I was not able. Nevertheless, your dear mother never once complained about that. My dear children, I ask you to take my place in the home as much as you are able.

The Birth of a Son

In 1999 I gained access to the court records of my father's court case. While going through yellowed pages containing the aroma of a good testimony of the last years of my father's life, I unexpectedly discovered a document which answered a question I had. The report of the prosecution concerning the conclusion of the investigation states:

> June 5, 1939
>
> I, Melnikov, an investigator of the NKVD investigation department of Leningrad, informed citizen Ivan Mikhailovich Khorev that the investigation of his case is concluded and his case material will be forwarded to the Public Prosecutor to be brought to trial.
>
> The accused, I. M. Khorev, acquainted himself with the material in Leningrad Prison #1 during a time period of one hour and thirty-five minutes. Thereupon he declared that he does not

> endorse the testimonies of the witnesses, and that he had only one meeting of Baptists in his apartment in 1931 at which time fifteen persons gathered on the occasion of the birth of his son.
>
> The signature of the accused,
> __________ (Khorev)

In December 1931 my parents had invited their friends to their place to praise the Lord for the birth of a son. It always brought great joy to a family when a son was born. Our family was not an exception. One winter evening our room in the communal apartment was filled with guests. They sang Christian hymns and prayed till late at night. The neighbors reported them. It was this event which formed the basis for my father's prosecution and became the primary evidence of his "counter-revolutionary" activities. The joy of that evening, in actuality, became my father's death sentence. My birth cost my parents much, but I only discovered the extent of that cost sixty-eight years later.

We Shall Meet at the Throne

Dear children! My story of my father would be incomplete if I failed to tell you of one event that I view as very important. In a solitary cell in the Leningrad police station, I recall a conversation with my father that left a deep imprint on my memory.

The year of 1938 was a very difficult year for the church of Christ. All the prayer houses in Leningrad were closed. All the ministers were being arrested, and their families were being exiled. Church services were absolutely prohibited. Sometimes during the day, but generally during the night, NKVD officers arrested active church members and sent them to prison or exile, often without a trial.

The same fate was awaiting us, for my father was also a minister in one of the Leningrad churches. A bag, packed by Mama in anticipation of Papa's arrest, lay by the door of our room. We often went through its contents. It contained his undergarments, a black shirt, patched insulated pants (we were poor), felt boots sewn by Papa, a bowl, a spoon, and a cup.

One day after work, Papa sat down at the table and began writing something. We came and stood around him. He began to talk to us in a very spontaneous manner. His words left a deep imprint on my soul.

"Children," he said, "shortly I will be leaving on a long journey. I don't know if I will ever return home. Only the Lord knows the path I will take and all the dangers along it. Before I leave on this long trip, I would like to decide where to meet so that we don't lose each other."

To help us understand what he was trying to explain, he gave us an example: "When people go to the market, shopping mall, or train station, they often agree on a meeting place beforehand, in case they lose each other. For example, they might choose the entrance to the market or the information desk.

"We are also going to lose each other for a while, children. Let's agree now to meet each other at the great white throne. As soon as you enter the heavenly Jerusalem, come to the white throne where Jesus will be sitting. I will meet you there, and we will never again be parted."

Then Papa began to draw heaven and the white throne where all the pilgrims of God will fall down and worship. He said all of this with such intensity and inspiration that we could not remain indifferent to his words. Many times after that conversation I thought of the coming meeting of all the saints.

My father was arrested three or four days after that. At 2:00 A.M. when we were all sleeping, somebody insistently rang our doorbell. Mama quickly opened the door. Three NKVD officers entered and presented an arrest warrant for my father. However, he was not at home. He worked as an electrician on the night shift. They decided to search the apartment and arrest him at work. They did not search long. Papa had a extensive collection of Christian books. In those years when they did a search, they confiscated all Christian literature and destroyed it. Yet the Lord was merciful, and the books were not taken. One of the books interested the one officer so much, that he read till morning. (The books disappeared without a trace after our evacuation from Leningrad during the siege.)

Early that morning as he returned from work, Papa saw that the light was on in our room. A "Black Raven"[21] stood by the entrance of our apartment building. He immediately realized that the time had come for him to part with his family. Trusting in the Lord for strength, he entered the apartment. They were there awaiting him. The NKVD officer presented his arrest warrant.

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[21] Black Raven: The black Soviet version of an SUV that the NKVD and KGB drove.

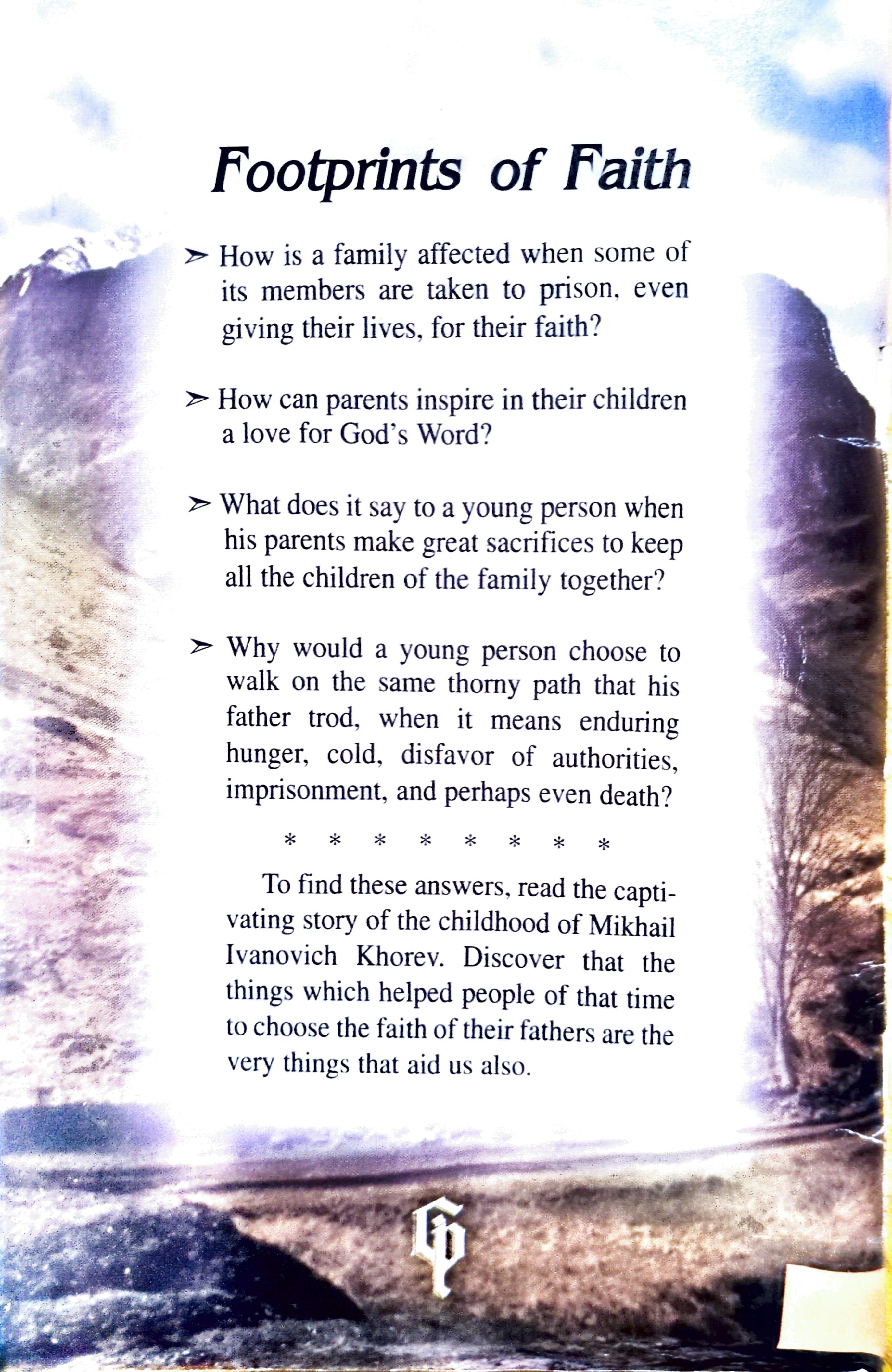
Before Papa left, he gathered us together for prayer. I do not remember the words of my prayer, nor my sisters' prayers, nor my mother's prayer. However, I remember the basics of Papa's prayer: "Lord, I love my children and wife very much. My home is very dear to me. Yet, most of all I love You, for I have chosen the thorny way. I entrust to You my family and all their needs. Allow me, Lord, to consider that You have taken full responsibility for my family upon Yourself. I know, sovereign Lord, that You are always true to Your promises. When my wanderings end, and I appear at Your throne to glorify You, I will see my whole family there. I praise You for the hope which You have given me today. May Your name be blessed through this separation!"

Mama put a few cubes of sugar into the bag we had previously prepared for the time of his arrest. Papa calmly said good-bye to each of us, kissed us all in parting, and under guard of the NKVD officers, went out to the "Black Raven." We were not allowed to go farther than the door. The "Black Raven" stood directly outside the window of our house. From there we could see him very well. We saw him walk up to the vehicle with his bag slung over his shoulder. He looked in our direction, and seeing the faces of his dear family looking out the window at him, he smiled, raised his right hand in parting, and was gone. The door slammed shut, and the "Black Raven" took him away, never to return.

A year and nine months later we received our last letter from Papa. He wrote it from Siberia two hours before he passed on into eternity. The letter was concise: "My dear wife, if you hear that I have died, don't believe it. Believers don't die; they pass from death unto life."

Papa knew that he would never be freed. He courageously walked in the footprints of Jesus Christ with the assurance that *"If we suffer, we shall also reign with him."* My father possessed that sacred hope, but it was also his desire that his children would join him in the kingdom of heaven. I cannot help but rejoice and thank the Lord for His love and care for His children!

On January 27, 1980, in the cell of the Leningrad police station, I thanked God for my father. I asked God for strength and wisdom to be an example to you, my dear children, in following Jesus Christ on the narrow way!



Footprints of Faith

- How is a family affected when some of its members are taken to prison, even giving their lives, for their faith?
- How can parents inspire in their children a love for God's Word?
- What does it say to a young person when his parents make great sacrifices to keep all the children of the family together?
- Why would a young person choose to walk on the same thorny path that his father trod, when it means enduring hunger, cold, disfavor of authorities, imprisonment, and perhaps even death?

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To find these answers, read the captivating story of the childhood of Mikhail Ivanovich Khorev. Discover that the things which helped people of that time to choose the faith of their fathers are the very things that aid us also.